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Circling

Helen G. Reed
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Circling
(For A.S.)

Helen G. Reed

The campers listened as hunters
and dogs followed the bear.
All day the baying moved
with the shadows through peaks
that nuzzled like hungry cubs
at any low-hanging cloud.
The mountain played
with the dog-plaints—
a ventriloquist
changing their tones,
bringing them nearer,
twisting them out, away.

The campers felt those things
that happen in mountains—
the falling upward into blue vertigo,
a sun inferred but seldom seen,
subtle inversions of time.
They kept to their daily routine,
always aware of the circling,
unseen, out there.

At sunset the clouds shifted,
lifted a little, bloodied beneath
by screams, howling, shots.
Those at the fire averted eyes,
plummeted into silence.

The next day the campers, hiking,
marked where vultures' slow black
circling carved the sky.
They found the hunters eating,
snouts in plates—snuffling, grunting—
big teeth—yellow as squash—
snaggled in grins, spiky.
Blue-barreled guns leaned
like spears.

The bear hung, splayed
by ropes between two trees
in a clearing, his blood
a red-brown shadow below—
penumbra on the clearing's moon—

all the wilderness
of him
leached away.